

Understanding and Facilitating Organizational Change in the 21st Century: Recent Research and Conceptualizations

SEVERAL CONDITIONS have coalesced in recent years that necessitate a synthesis of the organizational change literature. There are more pronouncements of crisis in higher education today than ever before, coming from both within and outside of the academy (Birnbaum, 2000). Whether this is actually a time of crisis is debatable, yet it is clear that higher education faces a host of changes that can no longer be ignored. The list of transforming forces has become so common that it is almost unnecessary to name them—technology, new teaching and learning approaches such as community-service learning or collaborative learning, cost constraints, changing demographics, international competition, assessment, accountability, diversity/multiculturalism, and other challenges create a complex climate. (For a detailed look at each of these forces, see Green and Hayward, 1997.) These challenges have, in some cases, created stress in institutions (Green and Hayward, 1997; Leslie and Fretwell, 1996). Not only is change described as necessary based on external pressures, but also the sheer number of major changes keeps increasing (Green and Hayward, 1997; Leslie and Fretwell, 1996).

Some scholars describe the changing context as a reason to reexamine organizational structures and culture, necessitating internal change. Bergquist, for example, describes the postmodern era as posing new challenges for organizations, particularly around the issue of change (1998). Postmodernism requires organizations to change their size and shape to respond to a more fragmented and complex environment. Reexamining the institutional mission is a major priority (Bergquist, 1998; Cameron and Tschichart, 1992). As institutions rethink their reasons for being, the institutions themselves change their

identities; Bergquist lists several institutional responses. First, the postmodern environment means that organizations move from more singular models of operation (as bureaucratic or as a research university) to examining multiple ways to be successful. Second, organizations might actively engage the various subcultures within higher education institutions, including the political, bureaucratic, symbolic, and human resource cultures. Third, other organizations might develop entrepreneurial cultures and structures in which they are able to adapt to changes. Last, they might find their distinctive niches, focusing on specialized aspects rather than a more comprehensive mission as higher education institutions have done in the past. Organizational change is conceptualized as an effort at becoming less homogenous and responsive to the multiplicity of various constituents (for example, women and people of color), customers, or interest groups. According to Bergquist, the postmodern era is requiring organizations to change; there is no way to avoid this cycle.

Another factor requiring an update to our knowledge base on organizational change is the plethora of new models developed and research conducted in the last decade. The Kellogg Foundation has funded several major studies on change and transformation within higher education, resulting in the creation of several research teams around the country that have developed new conceptualizations and strategies for change. In addition, the Pew Charitable Trusts Leadership Award, initiated in 1996, attempts to document institutions that have responded to calls for change in higher education, providing models for other institutions. The purpose of this project is to highlight successful change efforts and help more institutions realize the necessity of change. Institutions involved in the Pew project are required to illustrate change in curriculum, faculty roles, and resource allocation. The sheer number of calls for change by policy-makers has spawned interest from organizational theorists in further exploring the structures and attitudes that influence the change process. Although many individual publications are being developed, without synthesis of these various ideas, there is no way for practitioners to compare the advantages or disadvantages of various models and conceptualizations.

Finally, higher education administration programs have developed new courses on change or leadership classes in which organizational change is a major component. The growing number of classes in this area also requires

that the knowledge base be collected and organized in one publication. Even if there were not calls for change, it would be necessary to synthesize this literature for students, faculty, and scholars. Although episodes of extreme change tend to be cyclical, anyone who has spent any time in organizations knows that change is ongoing. This knowledge is always needed for leading and working within higher education institutions.

Probably the single most important reason for readers to carefully review the information from the collective research knowledge base is the findings of research studies about change: using change strategies accurately has been demonstrated to affect the success or failure of an effort (Collins, 1998). The research also illustrates the important principle that one size does not fit all when it comes to change approaches—a principle commonly misunderstood among education professionals (Birnbaum, 1991a; Bolman and Deal, 1991). Solutions such as total quality management, interpretive strategy, or becoming a learning organization do not work within all environments, among all types of changes, or within all institutional structures and cultures. Yet professionals tend to use whatever change theory or approach they are familiar with or that is popular at the time. With many prominent scholars and opinion leaders calling for a serious examination of institutional structure, mission, and culture, and a plethora of new research and ideas, a better understanding and synthesis of knowledge about change seems appropriate.

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Distinctive Contribution

This monograph presents a critical synthesis of research literature on the organizational change process at the institutional level, providing guidance about the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches or models and offering research-based principles. This differs from other resources that focus on one approach, such as reengineering, or nonresearch-based models. Much of the organizational change literature has been written from the perspective of a writer who believes in one approach to facilitate change. Such writers often become advocates of a model, rather than providing careful, cautionary tales

to readers about use of the approach. Also, the vast majority of the literature focuses on planned change; in fact, the last major review of change literature in higher education, by Robert Nordvall (1982) focused only on planned change. Although planned change is important to understand, much of the change that occurs is unplanned or only partially planned. Another weakness in the change literature is that the vast majority of literature relies on anecdotal change stories or cases such as *Introducing Change from the Top in Universities and Colleges: 10 Personal Accounts* (Weil, 1994). These voices can provide some insight, but tend to be idiosyncratic stories that can be applied to other situations and campuses with limited success. This report is distinctive in its focus on research.

Moreover, it focuses on organizational change rather than change agents. Many recent books review change agents' roles, examining how department chairs, deans, faculty, student affairs officers, and presidents can help to initiate change (Wolverton and others, 1998). These books tend to focus on particulars of a functional area. For example, change agents in academic affairs administration are briefed on the importance to change of tenure review processes, evaluation, faculty development, or hiring (Lucas and Assoc., 2000). Such resources for change agents provide some helpful strategies, yet they lack the broad, conceptual knowledge necessary to create and sustain change. Furthermore, these resources are based on experiences and anecdotes rather than research, so there is no proof that they work. At this point, no broad synthesis of the conceptual, research-based literature on the change process has been developed. This monograph attempts to fill that gap in our knowledge.

Focus of the Monograph

It is assumed that higher education institutions do change, yet we need to better understand how, why, and under what circumstances this occurs. The focus is on synthesizing the literature on all change models across the multidisciplinary fields that have studied change, examining these models in relation to the unique higher education environment, and trying to determine the relative merit of various approaches to studying and understanding change in higher education. This monograph focuses on change at the institutional level

and will address state- and national-level studies only occasionally. For sources on state change, see Altbach, Berdhal, and Gumport (1998); for national systems, see Clark (1983a) and Sporn (1999). This work will not argue for the need to change. For an overview of the need for change or the literature on various changes currently facing the academy, see Green and Hayward (1997); Leslie and Fretwell (1996).

This monograph is organized in the following manner. Article two focuses on reviewing major terms or concepts related to change, such as first-order and second-order change, scale of change, and proactive versus reactive change. These terms are important for understanding change theories and beginning to develop a common language for change. One of the major difficulties related to change is that people have unspoken assumptions about how they define and think about change. This article provides some common concepts so that campus leaders can frame discussions about change and identify hidden assumptions. It also attempts to define what change is and distinguish it from diffusion, innovation, institutionalization, and other similar phenomena. It is important to realize that there are many different definitions of change and that these definitions are directly tied to different theories about change. Thus, there is no single definition offered in article two; instead, definitions are offered in article three in conjunction with theories of change.

Article three reviews the research on organizational change, from several disciplines including political science, anthropology, biology, physics, psychology, business, and management. Because the literature is so extensive, it is organized into major change theories according to a typology of six categories: evolutionary, lifecycle, teleological, political, social-cognition, and cultural models. This typology is an original contribution, but builds on the work of Van de Ven and Poole (1995). These categories of models/theories are described in terms of their definitions of change, major assumptions, examples of specific models, key players and activities, and benefits and criticisms. By understanding all major theories about change, leaders will be better equipped for facilitating the process.

Article four focuses on defining the unique characteristics of higher education institutions, relying heavily on the work of Robert Berdhal (1991), William Bergquist (1992), Robert Birnbaum (1991a), Burton Clark (1983a),

and Karl Weick (1991). The change literature is analyzed in relation to characteristics that define higher education organizations as unique. Few scholars have examined change on college campuses as distinct from that in other organizations. Instead, models of change from other disciplines or used within other organizational types have been applied to higher education, without consideration of whether this transference is appropriate. The examination of the unique features of higher education in relation to change and observations made from this meta-analysis has the potential to develop approaches to change that are more successful.

In article five, the literature on change from the field of higher education is presented. The typology of change theories is used to organize this literature, allowing the reader to reflect on the key assumptions, benefits, and criticisms already presented. The results of studies directly applied within the higher education setting assist in understanding the efficacy of these models/theories, sometimes derived from outside the realm of higher education, for understanding organizational change. This article does more than synthesize the literature—it begins to create a vision for how change occurs in higher education.

In article six, the earlier articles are consolidated into a set of research-based principles for understanding and facilitating change in higher education. Rather than provide solutions or recommend a model for change, this monograph provides a set of principles that can be used to guide the change process. These principles are derived from the collective wisdom of hundreds of research studies. No recipe is offered; understanding change requires the development of a common language and conceptualization of change that is context based.

The monograph ends with suggestions for future research, article seven. We know less than we should about how change occurs in higher education. There have been few long-term or sustained research agendas by researchers or research projects. Instead, a researcher will conduct a study or two on change, then move on to another topic. Given the lack of consistent attention to this topic in higher education, there are many gaps in our knowledge that need exploration. Future areas for research are detailed, again organized by the typology of six models.

In summary, this work focuses on providing the reader key insights into the change process: (1) it provides a common language for organizational

change by reviewing terminology; (2) it brings together the multidisciplinary research base on change; (3) it outlines the ways in which higher education is a distinct institutional type and how this might influence the change process; (4) it reviews models and concepts of organizational change derived from within higher education, comparing and contrasting different approaches; (5) it offers research-based principles for change; and (6) it presents areas in need of future research.

Audience

It is assumed that any member of the institution can be a change agent and can successfully use the principles listed in article six. In fact, acknowledging that any institutional member can be a change agent facilitates the change process. One of the core assumptions among many change models or conceptualizations is the importance of collective leadership. Therefore, it is hoped that all readers feel empowered to use the lessons in this monograph.

The audience for this work is quite broad. Academic leaders, such as deans and department chairs, should find this a helpful resource to complement books on institutionalizing post-tenure review or assessment, for example. This will help them to overcome barriers that these books are not likely to describe or aspects of the process that are not articulated. Staff members, often not familiar with academic traditions, will find this book insightful as to any distinctive characteristics of the higher education enterprise that may have eluded them. Many staff members come to higher education from the government or private industry and have difficulty understanding shared governance and faculty autonomy, for example. When staff members try to create changes related to the admissions process, faculty behavior might be difficult to understand. For upper-level administrators, presidents, trustees, and even policy-makers, this monograph offers insight into the way change occurs in higher education, which will challenge some of the current approaches to change, such as performance funding. Yet it reinforces other traditions such as accreditation or fostering local change, and it creates opportunities for suggesting new policy directions such as ways to develop environments for adaptability.

The main audience is members of college and university communities. Each individual can enhance their knowledge about change and learn a language that will help them to facilitate the process on campus. There are better sources for informing policy-makers and trustees, yet they can also benefit from the information synthesized and analyzed in this monograph. Higher education graduate students, faculty, and researchers are also a main audience for the monograph, as the mission of this series is to bring together our collective research knowledge on a topic. This monograph can serve as a text for courses on change and innovation in higher education.

To Change or Not to Change?

Although this volume brings together the collective knowledge base on change, the author acknowledges that higher education institutions are important social institutions that maintain timeless values and should be resistant to change that would endanger many of these important values. As a historian of higher education, I realize how vastly institutions have changed over the years—by admitting new populations, changing the nature of the curriculum, reorienting employee roles, or developing new administrative structures—but each of these changes occurred in distinctive ways, some planned and others evolved. This monograph is different from most of the literature on change; it advocates resistance to change as a healthy response. Readers should be clear on the fact that understanding the change process can be used to resist change as well as to encourage it.

Change is not always good, and it is certainly not a panacea for all the issues facing higher education. More leaders may need to prioritize various change proposals and defuse poor ideas, rather than always responding to changes from the internal and external environment. Therefore, failure to change can be a positive response. I am highly suspicious of the recent trends in business to reconfigure organizations every five years and of the idealization and symbolic value of change as a trophy of managerial success (Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996). Higher education institutions are tradition-bound, and continuity is an important feature. One of the reasons for higher education's success as an institution has been its ability to stay focused on its mission. Thus,

this monograph is in no way intended to advocate change for change's sake. Change should be engaged in only if the environment legitimately challenges the organization's key mission or expertise. Furthermore, proactive change, rather than change led by the environment (as is the case in the health care industry), is usually in the best interest of higher education.

Zelda Gamson recently questioned the calls for change in higher education, asking which important aspects of higher education we should not change. She noted autonomy and community as important principles to be maintained (Gamson, 1999). What needs to be preserved may be just as important to understand as what needs to be changed. Another important plea is made by John Macdonald in his book, *Calling a Halt to Mindless Change*, written in response to the past two decades' literature on organizational change. This book notes that "executives should listen to the siren song of change with a healthy dose of skepticism" (MacDonald, 1997, p. viii). A main concept of MacDonald's book is a return to viewing change as evolutionary rather than declaring that every institution needs revolutionary change, the latter being a popular view in the management literature. The author suggests that the real pace of change is well within normal decision-making cycles. Calls for urgent revolutionary change are seen, for the most part, as scams created by management consultants to create a market for their knowledge. Although MacDonald may hold an extreme view, I think it is important for campuses to engage in a discussion about the need for and circumstances of change to ensure that the institution does not abandon important traditions that support excellence and performance. Balance between calls for change and tradition may be desirable.

